

Above, Beyond and Forgotten

Despite his unrivaled combat record over five days in 1945, Llewellyn M. Chilson was denied his country's highest honor. *By Fred L. Borch and Robert F. Dorr*



Llewellyn M. Chilson (right with rifle at port arms) escorts a column of German prisoners to the rear during the fighting around Anzio. Just four days before this picture was taken, on February 15, 1944, the 23-year-old private first class from the 45th Infantry Division had been wounded and captured. Rather than go meekly to a POW compound, Chilson had convinced his captors that they should surrender to him. By the spring of 1945, incidents such as this had led to Chilson's being dubbed a "one-man army" by his "Thunderbird" comrades.



Lewellyn M. Chilson should be a household name—President Harry S. Truman thought so. At a White House ceremony on December 6, 1946, the president pinned seven combat awards on the chest of Master Sergeant Chilson. As he gazed at the medals covering the sergeant's uniform, Truman said: "This is the most remarkable list of citations I have ever seen. For any one of these, this young man is entitled to all the country has to offer. These ought to be worth a Medal of Honor—that's what I think about it."

Truman was right. Chilson's heroism in World War II was extraordinary. No man ever received so many decorations at one time, and no member of the U.S. armed forces during WWII earned more. Moreover, the 1946 White House ceremony was one of the rare occasions when a president has presented decorations other than the Medal of Honor. The ceremony capped off the amazing saga of a soldier who was called a "one-man army" for his actions in France and Germany in 1944 and 1945—and who, as Truman pointed out, almost certainly merited the one award he did not receive.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, on April 1, 1920, "Al" Chilson grew up on the streets of South Akron. He went to Lincoln Grade School and South High School, and later told a reporter that he got his first taste of fighting on the streets, adding, "The neighborhoods where I grew up in South Akron were pretty tough."

Chilson never graduated from high school. He quit at age 16 and took a job as a driver for the Renner Trucking Company. From 1936 until 1942, when he was drafted into the Army, the young man hauled freight across the country in a truck and trailer. He drove about 250 miles a day and made \$40 a week—a decent wage at the time. Then, on March 28, 1942, a few days before his 22nd birthday, Chilson was inducted into the Army. Records show he was 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed 150 pounds when he reported for duty at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Ind. Chilson completed basic infantry and amphibious training at Camp Livingston, La., and Camp Johnston, Fla. He then joined Company G, 179th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division.

The 45th originated as a National Guard division in 1924, when soldiers from Oklahoma camped together for the first time at Fort Sill. The unit was federalized in September 1940, a year after war broke out in Europe, when it seemed prudent for the United States to be better prepared militarily.

As hostilities with the Axis became increasingly likely, the division remained in federal service. After the United States entered the war on December 8, 1941, the 45th trained for combat in Europe. While the National Guardsmen in the 45th originally hailed from the Southwestern states of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Oklahoma, once the division was called into federal service young men from all over the States, like Chilson, joined the outfit.

All members of the 45th now wore a patch on their left shoulder that bore a red diamond upon which was emblazoned a yellow thunderbird. The Indian symbol represented "sacred bearer of happiness unlimited." The division's earlier insignia, which was replaced in 1939, had been a red patch with a yellow swastika on it.

The swastika, an ancient Indian symbol of good luck, was a logical choice for a fighting unit whose members were drawn from four Southwestern states. Germany's Nazi Party, however, had also adopted the swastika as its own device. Now at war with the Third Reich, the U.S. War Department thought it prudent to have a new insignia devised for the 45th. The yellow thunderbird was every bit as meaningful to the division's members, who began referring to themselves as "Thunderbirds."

The Thunderbirds prepared for combat at several camps and training facil-

When President Harry S. Truman finally finished pinning all of the medals on Chilson's chest at the December 1946 White House ceremony, the blunt chief executive exclaimed that this was "the most remarkable list of citations I have ever seen....These ought to be worth a Medal of Honor—that's what I think." Below: First Lieutenant John M. Trafails from I Company, 179th Infantry Regiment, looks over a German MG42 machine gun that had been captured near Lagoni, Italy. Rather than risk the lives of his men, several times over the course of his combat career Chilson took out similar machine guns on his own.

ities before departing for North Africa from Camp Patrick Henry, Va., in June 1943. Chilson and his comrades landed in Oran, North Africa, on June 22, and after two more weeks of special training took part in Operation Husky, the amphibious invasion of Sicily on July 10, 1943. The 45th, then under the command of Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton, fought well in the 100-degree heat against an enemy that exploited Sicily's hills and mountains to slow the Allied advance. Lieutenant General George S. Patton, then commanding the U.S. Seventh Army to which the Thunderbirds were assigned, was so impressed with Middleton's outfit that he exclaimed, "Your division is one of the best, if not the best division in the history of American arms."

After wrapping up operations on Sicily, the 45th landed at Salerno on the Italian mainland on September 9, and then went on to reinforce the Allied beachhead at Anzio in February 1944. During this period, as the Germans counterattacked in a vain attempt to push the Americans and British back into the sea, the 45th was part of the tenacious defense of the beachhead.

On February 15, 1944, near Carroceto, Italy, Thunderbird Pfc Chilson received his first decoration—a Purple Heart—after a shell fragment hit him in the face. Although wounded, he continued to fire his M1 carbine until he ran out of ammunition and was captured along with three other GIs.

In ordinary circumstances that would have meant the end of the war for Chilson and his comrades. The unflappable private from Akron, however, actually talked his way out of captivity. "A furious artillery barrage by our troops was the real reason we got away," he later said. "We told the Germans we might be able to return to our lines and talk the brass hats into letting up on the artillery." According to Chilson, his captors talked it over and then decided to set the Americans free. "They gave us our rifles. So we just grabbed four prisoners and started back to our lines. We were back 24 hours after our capture."

A combat veteran who had demonstrated leadership skills while surviving all of the division's many engagements, Chilson was promoted in April to corporal, which was followed by a promotion to sergeant in May. The high school dropout was now an assistant squad leader.

In a move to support the breakout from Normandy, capture Marseille, France's largest port, and seize the Rhône Valley rail and road network, the Allies landed in southern France on August 15, 1944. The 45th was in the leading waves of Operation Anvil.

After landing, the division advanced through France and crossed the Moselle River. By November, Chilson and the Thunderbirds had pushed into the Vosges Mountains, where friend and foe found themselves enduring cold and rain as they fought for control of the densely wooded hills. With considerable combat experience under his belt, it was in Alsace that Chilson embarked on a series of



even more remarkable exploits.

On November 26, the 179th Infantry was approaching Densheim, France. While attempting to cut the main road leading from the town, Chilson's platoon was suddenly halted by machine gun and rifle fire from a German roadblock. After directing his soldiers to lay down covering fire with a machine gun, Chilson moved forward—alone—as enemy bullets blanketed the area.

Taking advantage of darkness, Chilson outflanked the Germans. He crawled to within 60 feet of the roadblock, threw two hand grenades into the enemy position and then opened fire. When the firing stopped, the sergeant had killed three Germans and forced nine others to surrender. His attack allowed the company to cut the road and, as his subsequent citation for the Silver



Star stated, "materially aided" in the capture of Densheim.

By early December, the weather had gotten even worse. Military necessity, however, dictated that operations continue for Allied troops fighting in Alsace. Temporarily attached to a French unit, the 45th Division crossed the Zintzel River and helped clear the Germans from portions of the Maginot Line. On December 13, the division marked its 365th day in combat, and two weeks later, in part because he was one of the few veterans still with the outfit, Chilson was promoted to platoon sergeant.

The division remained on the line until late February. This relatively quiet period, however, was short. On March 15, 1945, the 45th Division jumped off from the Sarreguemines area and fought through the Saar industrial region. On the extreme left flank of the Seventh Army, the division reached the Rhine River near Worms early on the rainy morning of March 26.

At about 2:30 that morning, Company G began its crossing of the Rhine in small boats. After reaching the east bank, the company had been ordered to turn north and go up the bank for about 3½ miles until reaching the town of Gernsheim, which it was to capture and hold.

Company G had made it halfway across the river when the Germans, waiting to catch the Americans when they were most vulnerable, opened up with a barrage of mortar, rifle and machine gun fire. Additional firepower came from 20mm cannons.

Protected by the dark, the Americans made it across, but the 1st and 2nd platoons were immediately pinned down by enemy fire as soon as they reached the opposite shore. The lieutenant in charge of the second platoon was shot in the shoulder, side and leg, and was out of action. The situation was now in danger of getting out of control. Chilson took command of the platoon and quickly formed the disorganized and frightened GIs into a compact, efficient assault force.

He then began leading Company G up the right bank of the river. They had only gone about 100 yards when the Germans began firing on them with automatic weapons from the top of the dike running along the bank of the Rhine. Chilson ordered his men to hold their position and then began inching his way forward over the swampy, open ground and up onto the dike.

When he got within range of the German machine-guns, Chilson saw a horse-drawn ammunition wagon. He quickly threw a white phosphorus grenade into the wagon, which set it ablaze and destroyed the ammunition it was carrying. Chilson then rushed along the dike and with his carbine killed the German machine-guns by the light of the fire from the burning wagon.

Having destroyed the machine guns, Chilson ran back to his platoon and led them up to the dike and along the riverbank. At 4 a.m. the company was again halted by enemy machine guns. Two well-concealed German positions were firing onto the Americans. As before, Chilson ordered his men to remain in place and then crawled alone for about 200 yards into the darkness. Well forward of his own men, the sergeant then used a radio to call for mortar and artillery fire on the Germans, directing the fire by sound and flash until the two machine gun positions had been destroyed as well as two 20mm cannons that had also begun to fire on the Americans.

Chilson led his men forward. By 9 a.m. they had reached a road junction where they were again stopped by enemy fire from four machine guns and well-aimed small arms. "It was impossible to move," company commander Captain Raymond E. Wantz remembered. "We called for artillery fire but couldn't get it." Company G then put out cloth recognition panels to mark its position for a hoped-for airstrike. This idea was quashed when the GIs realized that the panels would most likely not be spotted by friendly pilots. Finally, Wantz decided to use a bazooka against the Germans. He sent out a two-man team that fired nine rounds before both men were wounded—

but none of the bazooka rounds detonated.

At this critical moment, Chilson volunteered to take two men and destroy the machine guns. After gathering eight white phosphorus and seven fragmentation grenades from his platoon—as well as 120 rounds of ammunition for his own carbine—Chilson had the rest of his men fire on the Germans while he led his companions up a water-filled ditch. When the trio was within 30 yards of the first enemy machine gun, Chilson told his two comrades to open up with their M1s. Then, rising up on one knee, Chilson hurled one white phosphorus and two high-explosive grenades at the enemy in rapid succession. As they exploded, he stood up and charged the Germans, killing three and forcing nine others to surrender.

Having silenced the first gun emplacement, Chilson then scrambled down the side of the dike and rushed some 65 yards to the second machine gun position, which the Germans had placed in a hollow tree stump. Reaching around the tree, he dropped a white phosphorus grenade into the stump—destroying the gun and killing two of its crew. The two surviving Germans were so stunned that they surrendered.

Not satisfied with his success thus far, Chilson then charged the two remaining German machine gun positions, throwing white phosphorus grenades as he advanced and yelling at the enemy troops to surrender. Thirty German troops were so amazed by what they saw coming at them that they dropped



The enemy positions that Chilson and his men encountered first in Italy, and later in France and Germany, made maximum use of the natural terrain. This one was taken out by hand grenades thrown through the slit of the bunker. Chilson used a similar technique to destroy an enemy machine gun near Densheim, France, in November 1944.

their guns and gave themselves up.

With the way ahead once again clear, Company G continued its mission to Gernsheim. By this time the 1st Platoon leader had been wounded, so Captain Wantz combined what remained of the two platoons and placed Chilson in charge. The 30 men the sergeant commanded soon encountered more German riflemen. Leading from the front, Chilson killed or captured any who opposed his advance.

At one point that morning, Chilson saw a 15-man German patrol approaching him while he was scouting forward of Company G. He quickly hid, and when the patrol was almost on top

of him boldly raised up, flourished his weapon and demanded its surrender. The Germans were so surprised that they dropped their weapons and gave themselves up before realizing that Chilson was alone.

Eighty other Germans were captured when Chilson and his men overran a company command post during their advance. The German first sergeant, surprised and demoralized by the Americans' relentless approach, surrendered his entire company to the GIs. A short time later, Chilson and his men overran a battalion command post. These Germans also surrendered to him.

By the end of the day, Company G had carried out its orders—it had taken Gernsheim. Although it suffered 25 casualties, without tank support the company had killed, wounded or captured about 200 Germans and seized 13 machine guns and four 20mm cannons. What is most impressive is that much of that destruction had been wrought by just one man—Chilson. He alone was responsible for killing or wounding some 30 of the enemy and taking an additional 200 prisoner. For his heroism that day, Chilson received the Distinguished Service Cross, which is second only to the Medal of Honor.

But Chilson was not yet finished. He remained in command of his small force and led it from Gernsheim to Aschaffenburg. On March 30, Company G was the battalion's reserve as Companies E and F attacked. When those two companies were halted by heavy enemy fire, Company G was given the mission to swing around the right flank of Company E, cross a highway and valley and seize a hill on the other side of the valley.

When Company G found itself stopped by a roadblock in the middle of the valley, Chilson once again stepped forward. After ordering his men to lay down a base of fire, he called up three tanks. Mounting the lead vehicle, Chilson stood alone on the turret for 40 minutes and spotted for the tanks as they fired 30 rounds of high explosive and 3,000 rounds of machine gun ammunition into the enemy position. Under his direction, the American tanks killed 14 Germans and took 40 prisoner.

Chilson then forced the captured Germans to remove mines from the roadblock and attach cables to the American tanks, which then pulled the roadblock out of position so the vehicles could pass through.

Shortly thereafter, when the terrain became so steep and forested that the tanks could not continue, Chilson led his platoon in an uphill assault on their objective. His men killed five Germans and took 14 more prisoner by the time they reached the top of the hill.

The Americans now discovered that they had outrun the battalion and were cut off. Ordered to hold the hill and to resume their advance in the morning, they prepared to spend a lonely night on the hill. Chilson, however, volunteered to go out and try to capture a German soldier to find out what the enemy was doing.

He returned about 30 minutes later with three prisoners he had captured at an outpost located 150 yards to Company G's front. The Americans soon learned how the Germans were fortifying their positions in the valley and where their strongpoints were located.

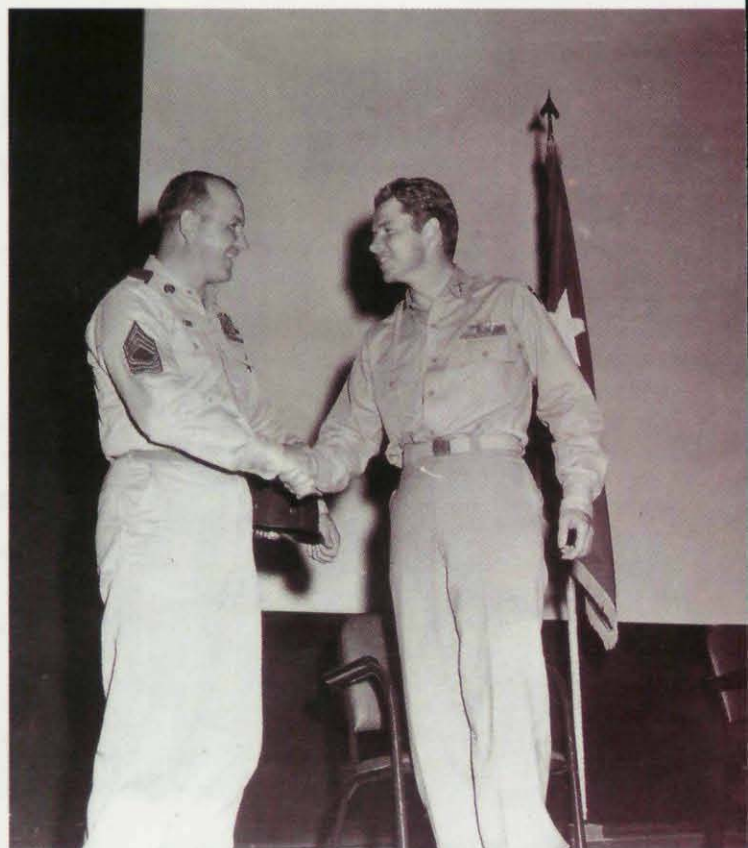


A GI keeps a careful eye on a German prisoner who is crossing an open field to surrender in the spring of 1945. As Chilson and his men discovered, however, even until the very last days of the war, for every German who was willing to surrender, there was another willing to die fighting. Below: A column of GIs from Chilson's battalion passes through Ober-Bessenbach, while curious civilians look on. Barely two weeks after this picture was taken, Chilson was wounded during his 511th day in combat and evacuated to a hospital in England.



On March 31, Chilson and Company G moved down to Horsental, a small village near Aschaffenburg. As they advanced, they were fired on by two 20mm cannons mounted on vehicles located behind the town. At the same time, enemy riflemen and machine-gunners began firing from positions in front of the town. Chilson ran back 300 yards through the heavy fire, climbed atop a tank and rode it back to the front—where he began directing its fire.

Although the German artillery and machine gun fire aimed his way was continuous—and wounded three soldiers nearby—Chilson remained in his position and continued to direct fire. In the subsequent fight two German machine gun positions were destroyed, six enemy soldiers were killed and seven others



Above left: Chilson with his wife Mary and daughter Roberta following the White House ceremony where the sergeant was formally presented with his decorations by an impressed President Truman. Chilson had met his wife, who was an Army nurse, while recovering from wounds. Above right: Chilson (left) greets Audie Murphy during a function at Fort Hood, Texas. While Chilson's heroics went unremembered by all but a few, Murphy's led to fame and a career as a Hollywood actor. Chilson remarked that when the two finally had a chance to discuss their wartime experiences, he was disappointed that Murphy just wanted to talk about his movie career.

captured. His heroics, according to a subsequent report, "were a deciding factor in the success of military operations" in Horsental, and led to the award of his second Silver Star.

It was his second medal of the day—earlier, he had earned a Bronze Star for leading a five-man patrol into Obernau. The citation for that award commended him for "completely disregarding his personal safety under intense enemy small arms fire" and for "gaining invaluable information on the enemy defensive position." Additionally, in firing his carbine at close range, he destroyed a heavily defended strongpoint, thus enabling his company to enter and clear the town with minimum difficulty and continue its advance. Finally, risking his own life, Chilson ran 50 yards through a hail of bullets to rescue a wounded man from his platoon. The man had been blinded by a bullet that was lodged between his cheekbone and eye. Chilson quickly administered first aid to the wounded soldier and extracted the bullet. Chilson's company commander later said he believed that the sergeant's quick surgery took pressure off the wounded soldier's optic nerve and may have saved his vision.

For his amazing performance since crossing the Rhine, Chilson would also receive the Legion of Merit for "exceptionally meritorious conduct." The citation for this prestigious award, which had been created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942 and was rarely given to enlisted men, recognized that Chilson had assumed command of his platoon after his superior was wounded and that he and his men had spearheaded the attack on Horsental. "In addition to leading the unit in a conspicuously outstanding and gallant manner," the citation went on, Chilson "displayed great heroism in a series of actions, which proved a

main factor in his company's successes and assured the advance of the assault platoon with a low rate of casualties."

After clearing German units from the Aschaffenburg area, the 45th Division drove on toward Nuremberg. On April 25, 1945, Company G moved into Meilenholen. When the Germans opened up with 20mm cannon fire, Chilson again took aggressive action. Spotting the enemy firing position, he got into a jeep and armed only with a machine gun drove down the main road and into the town. All alone and in an exposed position, Chilson opened fire. When the smoke cleared, more than three dozen dead Germans littered the ground around the artillery pieces.

A short time later, GIs on a reconnaissance mission tried to take the village of Zell. After cannon fire stopped their advance, Chilson mounted an abandoned *Wehrmacht* motorcycle and sped out in front of the reconnaissance troops. He quickly found six 20mm gun positions. One of them opened fire on him when he was just 50 yards away and shot the motorcycle out from under him. Undaunted, Chilson rolled to his feet and charged the gun, tossing grenades as he went. That attack knocked out the gun and killed its crew of three. For this act of bravery Chilson earned his second DSC.

Two days later, on April 27, Chilson and his men crossed the Danube River. Shortly after making their crossing and entering Neuberg, the Americans were halted by intense automatic weapons fire coming from the second story of an apartment building. Knowing that unless the Germans were knocked out immediately many in his platoon would be killed or wounded, Chilson rushed through the hail of bullets across the street and into the apartment. Racing up the stairs to the second floor, he

tossed a grenade into the room, killing two Germans who were manning a machine gun. The remaining eight enemy soldiers, no doubt stunned by Chilson, quickly surrendered to him—and his platoon then occupied the building without suffering a single casualty.

Minutes later, one of Chilson's squads was moving into the adjoining apartment house when it was stopped by automatic rifle fire from across a courtyard. Once again, Chilson moved into action. He threw a white phosphorus grenade into the courtyard and, behind its smoke, attacked the enemy with his carbine. He was hit in the right arm by a German bullet but did not slow down. Shifting the carbine to his left hand and resuming fire, Chilson killed two members of the enemy machine gun crew before he ran out of ammunition. When a third German tried to get away, Chilson pursued him, clubbed him into unconsciousness with the butt of his carbine and took the man prisoner along with seven other Germans.

He then called his platoon forward, and they occupied the building without a casualty. According to an official account, "his job finished, he fainted from loss of blood." It was his 511th day in combat, and also his last. For that action, he received a final DSC and a second Purple Heart.

Chilson was evacuated to the 34th General Hospital in Stockbridge, England. On June 21, 1945, almost two years to the day after he stepped ashore in North Africa, he left England for the United States. He spent four more months at Billings General Hospital at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Ind., before being honorably discharged.

While recovering from his wounds, Chilson met Mary Armstrong, an Army nurse from Santa Barbara, Calif. The two were married in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1945. After leaving active duty, Chilson took a job as a chemical laboratory assistant with J. Bishop and Company in Malvern, Pa. He performed routine tests in a lab for \$40 a week. But, like many men who had excelled as soldiers, Chilson found life as a civilian difficult, and he reenlisted in November 1947.

For the next 17 years, Chilson served in a variety of assignments in the United States and overseas. His last active duty was at Fort Sill, where his wartime outfit had gotten its start. He retired as a master sergeant on June 30, 1964.

After leaving active duty, Chilson moved to Tacoma, Wash., where he managed a gas station and drove a taxicab. The Chilsons subsequently moved to Puyallup, a small community near Tacoma. They lived in a mobile home near the Washington Soldiers' Home where Mary worked as a nurse. Chilson died in 1981, at age 61.

Even after more than 60 years it is hard to review accounts of Chilson's action and not believe his bravery merited the Medal of Honor. Many of his fellow soldiers thought so. The chain of command in the European theater did too. In fact, the reason Chilson did not receive his multiple Distinguished Service Crosses and other decorations until December 1946, some 18 months after he had been discharged from the Army, was that a recommendation for the Medal of Honor had been slowly winding its way through the Army's bureaucracy.



45TH INFANTRY DIVISION MUSEUM

Uncomfortable in civilian life, Chilson reenlisted in the Army in November 1947 and remained in uniform for another 17 years, retiring in June 1964 as a master sergeant. After leaving the Army, he retired to Puyallup, Wash., where he managed a gas station and drove a taxi. Several attempts to get him the Medal of Honor failed, and he died in 1981—an all but forgotten local hero.

On August 3, 1945, three months after fighting in Europe had ended, Lt. Col. Louis K. Hennighausen Jr., the commander of the 179th Infantry Regiment, recommended that Chilson be awarded the Medal of Honor. In May 1946, that recommendation, after an unexplained 10-month delay, finally made it to the desk of General Joseph T. McNarney, commander of all U.S. forces in Europe.

McNarney agreed that Chilson should be awarded the nation's highest combat decoration. According to official correspondence, it was only "after careful consideration" that the highest command in Europe concluded that Chilson deserved the award "for the

period 26-31 March 1945, although this entails a series of heroic actions over a period of time." The memo concluded that his several consistent acts of bravery resulted in the death or capture of countless enemy soldiers and the destruction of much of their equipment. Those actions also ensured that the assault platoon's advance would be accomplished with a minimum of casualties.

The War Department considered the matter in May and June 1946, when the Army's adjutant general, acknowledging that "action on this case has already been long delayed," requested additional eyewitness information from Chilson's former commander and others. Wantz, Chilson's company commander, provided an additional four typewritten pages to the War Department Decorations Board. Other officers did as well, but it was not to be. On August 28, 1946, a majority of the board disapproved the recommendation. "The recommendation," wrote the board, "reveals a highly commendable performance as a platoon leader, but does not clearly establish incontestable proof of conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

As a result of the board's decision, the European theater recommendation for a Medal of Honor was returned to command, which then awarded the Distinguished Service Crosses, a second Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star and second Purple Heart—all of which Chilson received from Truman.

The Army reopened Chilson's case—and again considered the appropriateness of a Medal of Honor for him—in April 1947. The result was the same. Over the years, Chilson's family tried to persuade the Army to award him the medal. Their last attempt—in the 1980s—by requesting relief from the Army Board for the Correction of Military Records also was to no avail. □

Fred Borch is retired from the Army and now works in the federal court system. He is the author of several books on Pearl Harbor and U.S. decorations. Robert F. Dorr is an Air Force veteran and the author of Chopper. For further reading, see: The Rock of Anzio: From Sicily to Dachau—A History of the 45th Infantry Division, by Flint Whitlock.